

# A Re-blooming Iris for March and November Gardeners

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## A welcome return of color

Just when we are ready for some color in our spring gardens, hardy bulbs appear—snowdrops, winter aconite and crocus. Blooming right beside them is the rhizomatous *Iris unguicularis* (uhn-gwee-kue-lahr-iss), or Algerian winter iris as it is commonly known. This iris is about 8-10 inches tall with a sweet fragrance, nesting below evergreen swords of 15 inches. The dainty flowers make lovely indoor bouquets and can be found in varieties of white, red, dark blue and most commonly, light blue. The flowers will not survive a sudden cold freeze. However, any unopened buds will survive, and as this iris blooms over a period of two weeks in both March and November, there should be more flowers to enjoy every day. A deep cold freeze to 0 degrees F. could cause the entire plant to die to the ground, but it will likely recover. The flowers last only a few days, so if you want to enjoy them indoors, cut some of the buds as they will quickly open in a warm house. These tough unusual plants are easy to grow and far outshine their later-blooming larger brethren.

Its native habitat is Greece and surrounding islands, western Syria, and North Africa. Loving a sunny dry location, Algerian winter iris will bloom faithfully every March and November in the Skagit home garden. The King County Iris Society recommends a south facing foundation locale but cautions that even in a dry summer, new plantings should be watered lightly. The secret to enjoying them is planting them where you can enjoy their beauty twice a year as their foliage tends to be ignored the rest of the gardening season.

Vita Sackville-West, noted British gardener, writing about Algerian iris in *The Observer*, in February of 1950, described the growing conditions:

Kindliness, so far as the Algerian iris is concerned, consists in starving it. Rich cultivation makes it run to leaf rather than to flower. What it really enjoys is being grown in a miserably poor soil, mostly composed of old lime and mortar rubble and even gravel: a gritty mixture at the foot of a sunny wall, the grittier and the sunnier the better. Sun and poverty are the two things it likes.

Algerian winter iris' evergreen foliage is tough and needs some early fall trimming to the ground along with the older swords in order to enjoy the November flowers. Be sure to do this before the bloom begins. Some gardeners even use the trimmed evergreen swords to tie up other perennials. Pests include slugs and snails that hide in the foliage and dine on the flowers, so be sure to bait for them in both spring and fall. The good news is that this iris is deer and rabbit resistant.



Algerian winter iris blooms here in early March when the first small daffodils are opening. This combination of yellow and deep purple blooms can cheer any garden after a long, grey winter. *Photo by Dixie Mitchell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener*

Sage British gardeners advise that the older a clump grows, the better it flowers. Be aware that dividing might hinder flower production the first year, but there will be many more iris rhizomes to either share or re-locate after dividing. With this in mind, simply take divisions after the bloom time, preferably in late spring, from the edge of the clump so as not to disturb flower production. Algerian winter iris is happy in containers so it can be moved into view when in bloom.

Two sub-species of *Iris unguicularis* are *I. lazica* and *I. cretensis*, which are both hardy in our Zone 8 gardens, according to the USDA scale. *I. lazica* is native to Lazistan (where the name originated) on the Black Sea and also northeastern Turkey. *I. lazica* can tolerate cooler conditions and some dappled shade (unless planted close to the Sound) in moist, neutral-to-acid soil. When planting the rhizome, take care to partially expose it above ground, and feed with a low nitrogen fertilizer in late summer or early fall. The flowers, borne in spring, are scentless and come in colors of blue, violet, lavender, pink and white.

*I. cretensis* is native to Crete and a sun lover preferring hot dry locations. This is a dwarf form of *I. unguicularis* with very narrow leaves and flowers colored violet to lavender/blue with a central orange line.

Locating a source for these extraordinary irises may be a challenge. Stay alert at garden shows for an opportunity to discover one of these beauties. Fellow gardeners in Great Britain enjoy a larger selection and availability than those of us in North America, but there are still a good variety of sources available here.

### Sources for Algerian winter iris:

- Annie's Annuals and Perennials in Richmond, CA [www.anniesannuals.com](http://www.anniesannuals.com)
- Dancing Oaks Nursery in Monmouth, OR [www.dancingoaks.com](http://www.dancingoaks.com)
- Far Reaches Farm in Port Townsend, WA [www.farreachesfarm.com](http://www.farreachesfarm.com)
- Joy Creek Nursery in Portland, OR [www.joycreeknursery.com](http://www.joycreeknursery.com)
- Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh NC [www.plantdelights.com](http://www.plantdelights.com)
- Secret Garden Growers in Canby, OR [www.secretgardengrowersstre.com](http://www.secretgardengrowersstre.com)
- Sequim Rare Plants in Sequim, WA [www.sequimrareplants.com](http://www.sequimrareplants.com)
- Wildwood Gardens in Molalla, OR [www.wildwoodgardens.com](http://www.wildwoodgardens.com)

**Note:** It may be helpful to note that this genus of iris was formerly known as *Iris stylosa* when searching the Internet.



**Left and Center:** This twelve year old clump of *Iris unguicularis* is ready for division and sharing. Gently separate the rhizomes from the outside of the cluster and replant into a sunny location. *Photo credit: Christine Farrow/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners* **Right:** Native to Crete and happiest in a dry, rocky landscape, this cultivar of *Iris cretensis* is called 'Magician's Magic' *Photo credit: Ken Walker/SIGNA*

## **RESOURCES:**

- *Winter Ornamentals* by Daniel Hinkley, 1993, Sasquatch Books, Seattle
- *The Garden in Winter* by Suzy Bales, 2007, Rodale Books
- [www.georgiaperennial.org/newsletter/article013/index.htm](http://www.georgiaperennial.org/newsletter/article013/index.htm)
- <http://overplanted.com/blog/archives/2011/01/01/irises-of-winter>
- [www.rhs.org.uk/Gardens/Rosemoor/About-Rosemoor/Plant-of-the-month/February/1/](http://www.rhs.org.uk/Gardens/Rosemoor/About-Rosemoor/Plant-of-the-month/February/1/)
- [www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/4208463/How-to-Grow-Iris-unguicularis.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/4208463/How-to-Grow-Iris-unguicularis.html)
- [plantlust.com/plants/iris-unguicularis/](http://plantlust.com/plants/iris-unguicularis/)
- [www.guardian.co.uk>Life&Style>Gardeningblog.](http://www.guardian.co.uk/Life&Style/Gardeningblog)